

The Summer Cottage, Viola Shipman

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PROLOGUE

The Rules of Creaky Cottage

July 2006

“There it is!” I said, rolling down the car window and sticking my head out.

Even though I was a grown woman—a married mom now in her thirties—there was nothing like seeing my family’s summer cottage again. I smiled as Creaky Cottage came into view. It looked as though it had been lifted from a storybook: an old, shingled cottage sitting on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, an American flag flapping in the breeze. The cool wind coming off the lake whistled, the grass on the dunes swayed, the leaves rustled in the aspen trees and the needles of the tall pines surrounding the cottage quivered.

My heart raced, and all the years fell away. I instantly felt as excited as the little girl who knew she’d be spending her entire summer here. I waved at my parents.

“We’re here!” I called. “We’re here!”

I could hear them whooping and hollering from the screened porch. Their happy voices echoed back, enveloping the car.

“Welcome, campers, to Creaky Cottage!”

Our SUV pulled to a stop at the end of the long, gravel drive leading to the summer cottage. My seven-year-old son Evan bounded out of the SUV before it had even come to a complete stop.

“Grandma! Grampa!” he squealed, leaving his car door open and sprinting up the labyrinth of warped, wooden steps to the porch. My mom and dad were rocking on a barn-

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red glider, but they leaped off it, faces beaming, waving little American flags, “Yankee Doodle” blaring from a vintage stereo. They pulled Evan into their arms and rained his head with kisses.

I laughed and turned to my husband, Nate, who was rolling his eyes.

“Please,” I said softly. “Don’t.”

“We’re not campers,” he admonished in the professorial tone he used to intimidate college freshman. “It’s so juvenile, Adeleine.”

“You know they’ve done it forever,” I said, reaching over to pat his arm. “Let’s just have fun. It’s summer. It’s July Fourth vacation. It’s our only time away from all the stress of life.”

Nate didn’t agree or nod, but instead walked around to the trunk to retrieve suitcases.

I hated when he didn’t respond to my comments—which had been more frequent of late—but now wasn’t the time to tell him this. We hadn’t seen my folks since Christmas, and I just wanted our visit to be pleasant.

“Adie Lou,” my mom and dad cooed at the same time as I headed toward them. They pulled me into their arms and hugged me tightly. “Our Yankee Doodle Dandy is home!”

“I love you, too,” I said. And I meant it. My parents were more than a little corny, but I loved them more than anything.

Nate caught up, lugging a big suitcase and an oversize cooler up the steps.

“Jonathan,” Nate said formally to my father, extending his hand, before turning to my mother. “Josephine.”

Everything Nate did was formal. It was one of the first things that attracted me to him in college. He opened doors, and wore sweaters with leather patches on the elbows. He took me to the theater and read books to me. He told me I

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could be and do anything, and treated me as an equal. He was unlike any beer-guzzling fraternity boy my sorority sisters typically dated. And his seriousness and manners gave him an air of authority that made me feel safe, things that now just felt distant and cold.

"Nathaniel," my dad said just as seriously, before busting into a laugh. "Smile, Nate! This is Creaky Cottage. Not Cranky Cottage."

"Yeah, Dad!" Evan added, before turning to his grandparents and jumping excitedly. "Are we ready?"

Nate smiled, but it came across as more of a smirk.

"Ready for what?" my dad teased, deciding to ignore Nate's response and focus on Evan instead.

"Ready to recite the rules!" Evan said, his eyes as blue and wide as the expanse of Lake Michigan behind him.

"It's the only time I've seen you pay attention to rules," I teased him.

My dad tucked his flag into his shirt pocket, reached into the woven Nantucket basket hanging from the front door and then turned as if he were a magician, his hands behind his back.

Evan giggled.

"Ta-da!" my dad said, producing five sparklers. He handed one to each of us, forcing the last one into Nate's hand. He then pulled a long fireplace lighter from the basket and lit them. Evan giggled even harder at the shimmering sparks.

"Remember, we have to recite all the rules before our sparklers go out," my dad said, his voice warbling with excitement. "Go!"

"First rule of the summer cottage?" my mom asked quickly as she held her sparkler high, looking a bit like the Statue of Liberty.

"Leave your troubles at the door!" Evan and I yelled together.

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"The second rule of the summer cottage?" my dad asked.

"Soak up the sun!" we said, big smiles on our faces.

"Rule number three?" my mom chimed in.

"Nap often!"

"Four?"

"Wake up smiling!"

"Five?"

"Build a bonfire!"

We recited every rule as quickly as we could—go rock hunting, dinner is a family activity, ice cream is required, be grateful for each day, go jump in the lake, build a sandcastle, boat rides are a shore thing, everyone must be present for sunset—until we got to the last one.

"And what's the final rule, Nate?" my dad said pointedly, turning to my rigid husband, who'd yet to say a word.

"I don't remember," he said. "I want to get this stuff in the fridge before it spoils."

He opened the door, dragging the cooler and suitcase inside with a loud grunt and then shut the door. Evan's face drooped as his sparkler sputtered.

"We didn't do it in time," he said, his voice sagging.

"We did," my mom said, emphasizing the first word for effect. "Great job, Evan. Want to go for a swim?"

"Yeah!" he yelled, his mood changing. He grabbed his grandma's hand and pulled her through the front door.

Sorry, I mouthed to my dad.

He winked. "Some people don't get the beauty of a summer cottage," he said softly, putting his arm around my shoulder. "But the magical campers do, don't they, Adie Lou?" He gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I'll go grab some stuff from your car," he said, heading down the steps.

For a moment I was alone on the front porch. Lake Michigan was as flat as glass, and the blue water was

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indistinguishable from the horizon. It all just ran together, and the beauty of it made me catch my breath.

Sailboats dotted the water, boats and Jet Skis zipped by in the distance, and the golden shoreline arced gently as if it were yawning and stretching its sandy back.

Such a contrast from the traffic of Chicago, I thought. Saugatuck, Michigan, is magical.

I'd been coming here my whole life, just as my parents and my dad's parents had. There wasn't a moment in my life where Saugatuck and Creaky Cottage hadn't been a part of it.

How old are you? I wondered, looking at the cottage.

Its shingles were weathered and gray, and those on the roof were a tad mossy in spots. The windowpanes were wavy, and the paint on the trim was peeling. My dad always talked about how much "sweat equity" he put into the cottage, but Nate always said at some point it would cost a small fortune to fix it.

I looked up. A turret topped the house with a window I always believed kept a lookout on the lake like a magical eye. A narrow staircase—so tight you had to crawl up at the top—led to the turret where there was a 360-degree view of the lake. I spent summers at our cottage reading, dreaming, believing that I could be anything I wanted.

I called the cottage "quaint" and "charming," but Nate referred to it as "old" and "decrepit."

The cottage creaked, and I smiled.

I loved the sounds our summer cottage made. It creaked in the winds that roared off the lake at night. The attic groaned in the heat, the wood floors moaned as we walked, the screens on the porch exhaled in the breeze. Hummingbirds whirled near the feeders my mom placed in the trees, moths thumped in the outdoor lights at night, bees buzzed in the towering gardens and overflowing

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window boxes, wild turkeys called to the thunder that boomed over the lake. The cottage actually seemed to sigh when it was filled with people.

I walked inside, and its distinctive smell—woody, watery, a bit moldy—greeted me. I took a step into the foyer.

Creak!

The cottage was a mix of shiplap, angled, beamed ceilings featuring endless coats of white paint, wide windows, paintings of the lake and gardens, vintage finds that were part shabby chic and part old cabin. Framed photos of my family going back generations lined coffee tables, walls and bookshelves. High-back chairs, a worn leather sofa draped with old camp blankets and a mammoth moose head hanging from a soaring lake-stone fireplace greeted visitors. My grampa—a Chicago grocer who used nearly all of his savings to buy the cottage so my grandma could get away from the store they never left—always called the moose that jutted from the fireplace Darryl, because he said its eyes looked as glassy as his best friend’s after a few manhattans. When I was little, my grampa would tell me that the cottage was built around Darryl, and that his tail still popped out the back of the house. I spent hours searching for Darryl’s tail end.

But the biggest focal point of the cottage was a hole in the wall with a frame around it. Visitors always wondered at first if my family was simply lazy housekeepers or terrible renovators who took pride in our mistakes until they got close enough to read the little plaque under the frame:

Bullet Hole from Al Capone
After Drunken Shootout

Rumor had it Creaky Cottage had once been Al Capone’s hideaway, a place where he ran liquor during Prohibition in

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collaboration with Detroit's Purple Gang. The noisy cottage—far away from Chicago and Detroit and difficult for police or other mobsters to sneak up on—was supposedly beloved by Capone.

I never knew if this was true or just another of my grampa's tall tales.

Creak!

Evan ran down the stairs dressed in his swimsuit, a towel draped around his neck like Superman's cape, screaming "Wheeee!" My mom followed, yelling, "Wait for me, camper!"

"Rule number ten!" I could hear Evan yell as he raced toward the lake, his voice echoing into the cottage. "Go jump in the lake!"

My mother slowed for just a second when she saw my face. "What's the first rule, Adie Lou?"

"Leave your troubles at the door," I said.

She nodded, winked and quickened her pace.

I smiled and the door slammed behind my mom.

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The slamming of a door jars me back to the present.

"The appraiser is finished," Nate calls into the cottage. "Inspection is complete, too."

I am standing in the living room of Creaky Cottage staring at Darryl, his eyes fixed on mine like I'm a traitor.

Nate strides past me, saying, "Boat guy just stopped by and thinks he might have a buyer for the *Adie Lou*, too. It's a good day."

Good day? I think.

He spins in the living room, follows my eyes and says, "That moose always unnerved me. Say your goodbyes. I'll leave you alone for a few minutes."

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I can't move, or speak.

"Adeleine," he says, using the same, sly tone I suspect he used to make his grad student, Fuschia—I *mean what kind of name is that? It's even a terrible color!*—fall under his spell.

A car honks.

"She's not very patient, is she?" I ask. "You haven't trained her very well."

"Adeleine," he repeats. "Fuschia's doing us a favor."

"Us?" I ask, my eyes wide.

Against my better judgment, and even though the inspection was today, I agreed to let Nate come to the cottage to pick up some of his belongings as well as his beloved vintage Porsche convertible that my dad let him store in the garage. I guess I just wanted to rip the Band-Aid off in one fell swoop. I didn't expect Lolita to tag along.

I peek out the window.

"What time does prom start?" I ask.

"Just follow the course," Nate continues in his formal detached way. "Play by the rules, just like our attorneys have outlined, and we'll both get the new start we want. You'll get a fortune from this place, and we'll see a nice windfall from the sale of our home in Lake Forest. You're sitting on a gold mine *if* you sell now. This place has seen better days. It needs a new roof, new plumbing, new life..." He stops for emphasis. "*New owners.*" Nate smiles and continues. "The Realtor will find some sucker who falls for its—what do you always call it?—'charm' before it falls apart."

I look at him, my mouth open.

Though my parents left Creaky Cottage to me, and Nate is entitled to none of its proceeds, I agreed to sell it because he convinced me that the rules were stacked against me.

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On your salary, you will go broke maintaining the cottage and paying its taxes, Nate told me over and over. And how often will you use it anymore? How often will Evan use it?

"I need to smudge this place," I suddenly say out loud, as much to myself as him. "Get some better energy in here."

Nate laughs dismissively. "You and your sage, and crystals, and beads and essential oils. And what did you ever do with that yoga certification, which took so much time and cost so much money?" he asks. "The only thing that new age BS will do is make the cottage smell bad for potential buyers." He turns and looks at me, as if seeing me for the first time. "You're not the person I married, Adeleine."

Nate walks away, the floor creaking. The door slams behind him, and the cottage seems to exhale relief with his exit.

Play by the rules, I think. But I've played by the rules the last thirty years, and where did that get me? I'm not the one who changed. You tried to change me. I'm the same woman you married.

I turn, and that's when I notice that the Cottage Rules sign my parents had hand-painted on old barn wood so long ago hanging askew, just like my life.

Who knew that so much could change in just over a decade?

My son is now in college, my parents are gone, and my husband and I are divorcing. Even my job—an ad executive creating cute slogans for corporations who poison the earth—is killing me. Everything my parents taught me seems to be fading away, just like the sparklers they used to hand out when we'd arrive.

I begin to walk out, but stop on the woven rug my grandmother made long ago, the colorful, circular one that has been in this same spot by the door for decades, collecting sand. I am unable to leave the sign askew.

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I straighten the sign, running my hand over the letters.

Rules.

This summer cottage was a place whose only rules were to be happy.

I stop on the last rule of the cottage, the one Nate refused to recite so many years ago. My heart races as I read it, tears springing to my eyes, blurring the words.

*SHAKE THE SAND FROM YOUR FEET,
BUT NEVER SHAKE THE MEMORIES
OF OUR SUMMER COTTAGE.
IT IS FAMILY.*